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ABSTRACT

Acknowledging children's need for informal conversation, the staff of an eastern elementary school began a reading incentive program to encourage children to read for fun and to increase their leisure by providing a listening ear while they told someone about the books they had read. Adult volunteers were recruited to listen to children's informal, oral book reports. Incentives in the form of ice cream certificates were used for the first 12 weeks of the program. When a child had read and reported on five books, that child received a certificate redeemable for an ice cream cone. When a child had read 12 books, a new book was placed in the school library with a bookplate announcing it as a gift from the child. By the time the incentives were discontinued, the children had developed the library habit and discovered for themselves the pleasure of reading books and sharing them. Students read over 13,000 books in the year and a half the program had been in effect. The rather sophisticated skills required to put their thoughts about the books they read into logical sequence before expressing them led to children's natural, unaffected expressions of ideas and opinions. The program was beneficial both for children whose native tongue is English and for children for whom English is a second language. (HTH)

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Listen to Me! I Want to Tell You Something!

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A READING INCENTIVE PROGRAM LEADS TO UNEXPECTED
BONUSES IN DEVELOPING ORAL LANGUAGE SKILLS.

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"Remember my tooth was loose yesterday? Well, it came out when I was eating an apple last night and I put it under..."
RING-G-G!

So many things, important things, a child wants to tell the teacher are interrupted it is a wonder that children ever develop the art of conversation. Yet we know that a child must develop a good oral language vocabulary before that child is ready to read. We continually stress the importance in education of speaking in sentences, but WHEN does this verbal exchange take place? In large groups like a class where they must raise their hands and take their turn speaking? Some ideas are so ephemeral they escape those little minds before they are fully formed into thoughts, never mind words.

There should be a place for informal conversation between teacher/child and child/child, but in these days of tight time schedules and fragmented school days, it doesn't seem to be the classroom. Where, then? The child WANTS to talk. The teacher WANTS to listen. Both are frustrated.

When we started our Reading Incentive Program at Bowles School our basic goal was to encourage children to read for fun and to increase their pleasure by providing a listening ear while they told someone about the books they had read. We felt it was beneficial for the children to have an audience of one adult to listen to their "reports" so we could be sure they had actually read the books they claimed, but we had no idea what a thoroughly satisfying experience it was going to be for both child and adult to engage in conversation on a favorite subject--BOOKS!

In the autumn of 1983, the Friendly Ice Cream Corporation invited us to design and pilot a reading-for-fun program, using ice cream certificates for incentives. When a child had read five books and reported on them, that child received a certificate for an ice cream cone redeemable at the local Friendly Ice Cream Restaurants. When the child had read (and reported on) 12 books, a new book was placed in the school library with a bookplate announcing it was a gift of that child.

Obviously, there was going to be no time in the school day for teachers to listen to the children discuss the books they had read. It was necessary to recruit volunteers to do this. We tried to remove the stigma from reporting on books read by making the reports oral and informal. It became a common sight to see an adult and child sitting in a corner of the library or corridor animatedly discussing the story or pictures. When the review of the book was completed, the volunteer would write in a notebook the necessary data so the principal could make the awards personally to the children each week.

We had planned this program to start the children off by offering incentives (like ice cream) as initial motivation only. In time we had hopes that the children would develop the library habit and discover for themselves the pleasure there is in reading a book and then sharing it.

Our hopes were realized--over 13,000 books were read in the last year and a half the program has been in effect. Incentives were offered for the first 12-week period and then the program continued without incentives just as successfully. It appeared

that incentives were needed to start the children off, but the momentum continued and even increased during the second period. In the autumn of 1984 we restarted the program, offering the ice cream certificates again and have continued it for a second semester in the spring of 1985 with no incentives. There has been no letdown in enthusiasm, although we feel the ice cream is an attractive kickoff idea.

Our greatest joy, however, has been the effect on the children of the opportunity of having an informal conversation with a friendly adult, particularly children from disorganized homes where conversation is limited to scoldings or brief conversations fit into television commercials. In order to review a story it is necessary for the child to have understood the book and be able to put thoughts into logical sequence before expressing these ideas to the adult volunteer listener. This calls for rather sophisticated skills and has led to natural, unaffected expressions of thoughts and opinions in this friendly, non-threatening setting. The child quite naturally uses skills like drawing conclusions, detecting absurdities, making inferences, as well as putting events in sequence. These are story-telling skills as well as the kind of study skills the teacher labors to teach in a developmental reading lesson but accomplished instead in a natural, conversational manner. The adult, even untrained, quite intuitively asks questions to stimulate this kind of thinking to the complete satisfaction of both.

For the child whose native tongue is English, this is a golden opportunity to talk and be listened to; but to the child

for whom English is a second language, it is an unparalleled chance to chat with a friend about a subject of mutual interest. There is nothing contrived about the situation. It all unfolds quite naturally and that is its strength.

The investment of time, organization, and effort has paid excellent dividends. It has been a workable program with a simple organization plan, uncomplicated data-keeping, and excellent support from both staff and parents. The volunteers work with a minimum of disruption to school routine and have received immense satisfaction from their efforts. School spirit has grown as well as the self-esteem of the children. Everyone in the school has given support to the program even if it is just a smile or a pat on the back. Statistics show an improvement in reading skills; the school library (and neighborhood library as well) show increased circulation, and we are hopeful that lifetime library habits are being established.

Best of all, children are talking, talking, talking, and someone is listening!